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# Review of Ron Scollon and Suzie Wong Scollon, *Nexus Analysis: Discourse and the Emerging Internet*

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RON SCOLLON AND SUZIE WONG SCOLLON. *Nexus Analysis: Discourse and the Emerging Internet*. New York: Routledge. 2004. 198pp. Hb (0-415-32062-3)/Pb (0-415-32063-1).

Reviewed by STANTON WORTHAM

This ambitious and rewarding book combines aspects of several genres. It is a methodological guidebook, offering strategies for doing ethnography, discourse analysis and action research. It is an empirical report, describing the authors' use of email and other resources to improve Native Alaskans' access to higher education from 1978-1983. It is a theoretical account of how "people, places, discourses and objects" come together to facilitate action and social change. It also provides a theoretical sketch of how computer mediated communication can work. These various aspects of the book work well together. The theory of social action undergirds the methodological suggestions, and the empirical material illustrates both the theory and the methodology. As befits a book on interconnections, the book explores how these aspects interrelate instead of elaborating the theoretical, the empirical or the methodological component in isolation.

The theoretical account of social action is interdisciplinary and creative, drawing on sociolinguistics, linguistic anthropology, literary criticism and social semiotics, as well as theoretical and cultural psychology. Social life takes place only through individual actions, but any action is afforded and becomes intelligible only with respect to various potentially relevant aspects of the context—from sociohistorical institutions and discourses, to interactional organizations, to individual histories. Because many such aspects of the context could potentially be critical to the action in question, analysts face the challenge of determining what is in fact relevant. Scollon and Scollon avoid many of the usual mistakes, like opting for "macro" at the expense of "micro," or vice versa, or

declaring a "macro-micro dialectic" while offering only vague gestures toward what such a dialectic might actually involve. They insist that processes of many sorts can be relevant to analyzing social action, and they offer a strategy for identifying relevant processes and their interconnections. Importantly, their account takes change and not static objects as basic. All aspects of context potentially relevant to social action are processes in motion over time, and the trajectories of change are often not homeostatic but instead unpredictable—and even open to influence by action researchers. "Nexus analysis" maps the intersections of these ongoing trajectories as they collectively facilitate action.

A "nexus" is a repeated site of engagement where some type of social action is facilitated by a relatively consistent set of social processes. As a heuristic, Scollon and Scollon describe three types of processes that generally play a role: "discourses in place," the sociohistorically developing discourses, organizations and procedures that constrain and facilitate action; Goffman's "interaction order," through which people organize social events; and the "historical bodies" of individuals, in which social and idiosyncratic habits are sedimented. Many other resources and constraints can also play a role, like the layout of physical space and the affordances of physical tools, specific conventions developed in a local setting, and so on. Scollon and Scollon show how such resources play a role, for instance, in the lack of interactional synchrony that occurred in an interview between a parole officer and a Native American client. They describe the historical bodies of the two participants, who have developed very different expectations and habits for regulating behavior, responding to authority and handling social stigma. They describe relevant sociohistorical discourses and institutions, including parole

officers' then-acute fear of violence from some clients and the American legal system's expectations about expressing remorse. And they describe the interactional asynchrony in the interview itself, as the parole officer asks more and more explicitly for information while the client becomes increasingly ashamed and unresponsive.

Each of these relevant processes, or "cycles," as Scollon and Scollon call them, has a relatively autonomous existence. The embodied habits of the individuals have been developed over ontogenetic time, for instance, and they change slowly. The social genres and cultural expectations established by the legal system have developed over even longer timescales. The various relevant cycles have their own circuits, as it were, having had their own trajectories coming into this nexus and their own trajectories going into the future. Nonetheless, each of them has an effect on the social action in question only as they jointly mediate that action. The book represents this "nexus" visually as a small square, with several intersecting ovals overlapping in the space of that square. Within the space of an action, say the client's unresponsiveness and the parole officer's resulting judgment, the cycles become interdependent. We can analyze the action only by exploring how the various relevant cycles interconnected in this instance. And if we want to change the typical course of actions like this, we must intervene by acting to change how these cycles interrelate.

Scollon and Scollon give several useful examples of "nexus" and the "cycles" implicated in them, ranging from biological ecosystems to events of intercultural communication to genres of computer mediated discourse. Most of the examples come from their work in Alaska, which focused on identifying and overcoming barriers that Native Alaskan students experienced at institutions of higher education. They have a

remarkable data set, including transcripts of electronic communication done for educational, administrative and other purposes, fieldnotes from participant observation in university teaching and life, in governmental and legal proceedings, and in visits all over Alaska to consult with service agencies and others, interviews with Native Alaskans and European Americans in various contexts, plus historical and institutional records of many sorts. They use these data to describe how they and many others responded to opportunities presented in the 1970s by the new oil money and the recognition of Native Alaskans' rights to access educational, medical, legal and other institutions. They focus on their use of early email technology to teach both distance learning and local classes and on their work to help universities lower barriers that frustrated many Native Alaskan students.

These empirical accounts are engaging, if a bit fragmentary, providing glimpses into institutions and communities, into frustrations and interventions that will be unfamiliar to most readers. In some ways the accounts read like an abbreviated ethnography of communication, addressed to the question of how problems in intercultural communication presented barriers to Native Alaskan university students. Scollon and Scollon use the "gatekeeping" metaphor to describe how university faculty and staff judged and sorted Native and non-Native students. Their attention to many relevant "cycles," however, allows their account to go beyond a mismatch of cultural styles and explore how processes from various relevant timescales played a role in the barriers confronted by Native Alaskan students. They also describe the different affordances of computer mediated educational communication and how these new affordances empowered some students while disempowering others.

Rhetorically, the book uses these empirical accounts to illustrate the methodological approach of "nexus analysis." By giving their approach this name, Scollon and Scollon suggest that simple "discourse analysis" will not suffice. Different approaches to discourse analysis focus on different types of cycles that can be relevant to explaining social action, but each focuses on only a couple and fails to attend to all possibly relevant cycles. Discourse analysis also focuses on discourse, which is of course crucial but which leaves out the material objects, non-verbal signs, bodily habits and other resources that contribute to the relevant cycles. Scollon and Scollon suggest procedures for initially mapping out relevant people, places, discourses and objects, for identifying the various cycles and timescales that might be relevant to the focal phenomenon and then for "navigating" these cycles and their interrelations. They include a 27 page "fieldguide" as an appendix, which could not be used without reading the book but which provides useful, concrete questions and suggestions for the researcher at various stages of the analysis.

*Nexus Analysis* does not provide detailed, concrete methodological guidelines—about what linguistic categories to examine in a text, or how to structure an interview, for example. It provides a theoretical and methodological framework within which more concrete methodological guidance can be given. It could be useful for more experienced researchers who already know specific techniques, or as a framing text for students who are also learning more specific techniques of ethnographic, discourse and/or sociolinguistic analysis. The book is not specifically linguistic at all, using "discourse" mostly in the broader sense and only offering a few detailed empirical analyses that focus on language, and it could thus also serve as a useful orienting text for a course on

ethnography. Students reading the book would have to be cautioned, however, that not all data sets are as comprehensive as this one. Practically, researchers rarely have the time, resources and expertise to follow all the potentially relevant cycles that emanate from their focal interest. Students also need guidelines for how to cut acceptable pieces out of a full nexus analysis.

Scollon and Scollon do not intend the book to provide a script for adequate research, however. They emphasize that all research is action, and that all action is itself positioned at the nexus of various relevant cycles. They do not make this point to undercut the validity of research or to paralyze researchers, but to show that researchers can make a difference in the processes they study. Nexus analysis is action research. Nexus analysts embrace their embeddedness in the places they study and try to improve those places. The book is refreshing not only for its innovative theoretical stance and methodological suggestions, but also for its optimism. Scollon and Scollon do not lament the intransigence of social facts (though they certainly acknowledge it) or the difficulties of research. Instead they provide an optimistic reminder that researchers are already out there acting in the world and a useful guide for how we can learn interesting things, open up important questions and make a difference in that world.

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